

## DIGITAL CRISIS: AN IN-DEPTH EXPLORATION OF THE DILEMMA OF DOCUMENTRY ONTOLOGY

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### Abstract

The ontology of documentary pursues the expression of authenticity, constructs an index relationship corresponding to the real life of objective society, and reveals the truth and truth hidden under the surface of things. However, this paradigm has encountered a major crisis in the digital age, mainly because digital technology has enabled documentary images to point to the correspondence between symbols and objects that objectively exist, and has been completely deconstructed. Documentary is mired in the digital crisis of "fracture" in terms of material source, picture arrangement, and acceptance to the audience, and many theoretical researchers have fiercely criticized the authenticity paradigm of documentary ontology. However, digital technology itself has its own unsolvable limitations, human beings have the instinct to pursue objective reality, and fiction can also serve the truth, which makes documentary still stick to its own ontological bottom line in the digital age, without abandoning their authentic nature. The ontological dilemma of documentary in the digital age can actually be solved.

**Keywords:** Documentary, Digital technology, Ontology Dilemma, Fracture Crisis.

### INTRODUCTION

The image is one of the most important means of communication in modern society, and when the Lumière brothers liberated the film from Edison's closed cabinet, the whole world we live in began to be filled with moving images. Among them, documentary is a kind of video art taken from the objective world, which has strong cognitive, entertainment and aesthetic functions, and always takes the authentic content presentation as its own essential attribute and core feature, so as to have a unique charm that cannot be replaced by other image works.

However, with the continuous development of digital technology, while documentaries are expanding the scope of expression, the ontological paradigm that can realize the authenticity correspondence between images and objective existence has also encountered a digital crisis of "fracture", and has been comprehensively questioned in terms of material source, picture arrangement, and audience acceptance. As a philosophical concept, ontology is not only an indispensable core feature of things, but also an irreplaceable essential attribute of things.

Therefore, for documentaries, the so-called ontology refers to the core essence of documentaries, and the ontological dilemma refers to the fact that the essential attributes of documentaries have changed, and the original core features can no longer maintain their original appearance. So what is the ontology of the documentary? What are the specific manifestations of ontological crisis? Has the ontology of documentaries in the digital age been completely reconstructed? And how do we respond?

Through the textual interpretation of documentaries and the corresponding theoretical criticism, on the basis of determining the connotation of documentary ontology, this paper elaborates on the major crises encountered by this ontology model in the digital age (i.e., the specific manifestations of the digital crisis), and then discusses whether the essential attributes of the documentary have changed, hoping to provide some solutions to the crises and dilemmas encountered by documentaries in the digital age.

## **1. Ontological Paradigm: The True Nature of Documentary**

As an individual being, human beings must first figure out what its essence is when they understand anything, so that they will not have cognitive biases in their basic nature in their future study, work, and life. Throughout the world's 100-year film history, the discussion on the core essence of documentary, which is the ontology issue, can be said to have a long history, mainly on the basis of the two discussions of "document reality" and "deal with reality" to construct the paradigm of authenticity.

### **1.1 Record Reality**

As early as the 20s of the last century, when documentary was just born, Robert Flahady, the pioneer of documentary and the originator of film and television anthropology, believed that documentaries were the history of the margins of the record, focusing on legendary stories, and his views and practices defined the core essence of documentary on the reflection of reality (Paul Roush, 2006), which became the beginning of the early discussion on the ontology of documentaries, and promoted this issue to be paid more attention to.

Since then, a large number of scholars have held this view, such as Krakauer, who argues that documentary film rejected fiction for the sake of raw material and focus on material reality (Krakauer, 2006). Roy. G. Levine believes that documentaries are a window into reality (Roy G. Levin, 1971). Chinese scholar Ren Yuan also agrees that the nature of documentary should be documentary—the restoration of objective material reality (Ren Yuan, 2008). The above-mentioned scholars have all defined the essence of documentary film on the dimension constructed by Flahady, and have recognized the importance of objective reality to the ontology of documentary. However, to explore the ontology of documentary from this dimension, it is easy to fall into the quagmire of naturalism, and it will make people obsessed with copying the whole record indiscriminately, which is suspected of going to the extreme of realism. In particular, Flahady's objectivity itself is only a formality, and the traces of his film "acting" are too heavy, especially *Nanuk of the North* is a documentary that has been "performed", and its romantic performance that is too legendary and far from real life has also attracted severe criticism represented by his disciple Grierson and others, which has harmed the objective reality of the documentary (Nie Xinru, 2021).

### **1.2 Deal with Reality**

Faced with this situation, John Grierson, the founder of the British documentary film school, considered Flahady's second work, *Moana*, to be a visual depiction of the daily life events of a

young Polynesian, with documentary value(Song Jie,2008).Grierson was the first to use the English word "documentary" to refer to the film, which led to the Chinese translation of the concept of "documentary", and thus became the first person in the English-speaking world to use the word "documentary", who believed that it was necessary not only to photograph natural life, but also to creatively interpret natural life through the juxtaposition of details(John Grierson, 2006). Here, Grierson constructs another dimension of the essence of documentary: the creative treatment of reality (Ni Xiangbao and Shao Wenyan, 2009).

This is the most influential definition of documentary ontology in the history of documentary so far, and it has been pursued as the criterion of documentary for a long time since then. For example, Barno believes that documentaries are fragments that capture reality and combine them meaningfully. This is what Grierson calls the creative treatment of reality, and realism and authority is the fate of documentaries (Eric Barno,1992).Richard Basham emphasizes that the real value of non-drama films lies in its insight into the human situation and his career to improve it, rooted in reality and reproducing this reality (Richard Basham, 2012).Chinese scholar Zhong Danian holds that TV documentary is a documentary TV film that directly selects images and sound materials from real life and directly expresses objective things and the author's understanding of this thing (Zhong Danian,1997). However, if we do not grasp the scale of processing, it is very easy to slide into the mold of subjective play, and the results of taking words out of context to first map and even transform the reality. In fact, the documentary aesthetic thought initiated by Greyerson was brought to the mire of pragmatism by himself in practice, with too much emphasis on the social function of documentary, and he has also become a propaganda tool of government ideology and mainstream concepts (Nie Xinru, 2016).

### 1.3 Authenticity Ontology Paradigm

Although Flahadi and Grierson's views and practices have insurmountable shortcomings, they do construct two dimensions to explore the ontology of documentary: documentary and fiction. After that, the discussion of the nature of documentary is fundamentally about oscillating between the two, finding a balance (Shan Wanli,2001).Lynda Williams, a well-known American film theorist, believes that the reality of the new and more popular documentary is made and constructed by documentary filmmakers through manipulative means, and documentary filmmakers are strongly calling for the lens that shows the truth(Linda Williams, 2001).Professor Lv Xinyu believes that documentary is a stylistic form that seeks a foothold in the multi-vision cultural value coordinates in the documentary method of video media, and observes and describes the relationship between the social environment, the natural environment and human existence, so as to realize the exploration and care of the meaning of human existence (Lv Xinyu,1997: p61).In fact, we can see these arguments as a process of transmutation and sublimation of negation of negation. From this perspective, the debate about the ontology of documentary not only expands our understanding of the essence of documentary, but also constitutes an important part of the continuous development of documentary. Just as Bassan and Sowegi believe that the many genres and tendencies of creative practice under the name of documentary cinema perfectly reveal the meaning of documentary cinema with their colorful work (Rafael Bassan and Danielle Sovigi, 2006).

Based on the above discussions, objectivity, documentary, non-fiction and many other characteristics all point to one point: real life. Documentary is often seen as a "mirror without memory" (Linda L. Williams), its characteristic lies in the ability to impartially reflect the real face of real life. This feature not only constitutes the core of the documentary, but also is its unique logo, making it unique among many art forms, recording and showing the world we live in from a real and objective perspective. Both of the two theoretical discussions on the nature of documentaries have one thing in common: documentaries must be based on the pursuit of the reality of images and significance, which is the fundamental standard to measure the legitimacy of the existence of documentaries (Wei Tianjiao, Wu Siyuan, 2012). So far, the core essence of documentary is the ontology is vividly about—authenticity.

We define the core essence of documentary documentary, which is ontology, as authenticity, but it does not mean that we should pursue "absolute truth". Because the "authenticity" we are talking about is the harmony and unity between the authenticity of existence and the verisimilitude of images, that is, the perfect combination between the truth of content and the truth of representation, and it is people's judgment of the nature of things (Zhang Zhenhua, 2008). It is impossible for us to seek a "purely objective" thing, and the so-called truth in general cannot be true in the pure sense, and all we can approach is "truth". For a documentary to convey an authentic message to the audience, it should first ensure that the producer is committed to non-falsification. It should not only be understood as a technical means, but also as an "attitude" and a "concept" of documentary filmmakers in the face of documentaries. To this end, the documentary ontology we want to pursue - authenticity, should be to use the character performance, shooting techniques, animation and other elements in the work to construct an "index" relationship corresponding to the objective real life, which can mobilize a variety of artistic techniques to give unique and creative expressions to reality, history and natural things, so as to carry out a "contract" communication based on the emotion and life understanding between the creator and the audience, that is, to allow the audience to maintain appropriate sobriety and make general judgments when watching the film. Reveal the "truth" and "truth" hidden beneath the surface of things (Nie Xinru, 2010).

## **2. Ontology Crisis: the "Fracture" Dilemma of Digitization**

In the traditional ontology paradigm of authenticity, the truth of the conclusion can be ensured through the comprehensive effect of material source, picture arrangement, and audience acceptance. The essence of documentary spirit, referred to as the spirit of documentary, emphasizes that the creator records specific people and their real life and cultural existence from a certain humanistic perspective in order to obtain artistic images with original ecological characteristics (Ni Xiangbao, 2006). But with the rapid development of digital technology, everything can give itself a digital veneer that focuses on binary computing. In line with current technological trends, digital technologies are closer to Weeser's vision of ubiquitous computing (Sarah Price, Carey Jewitt, Barry Brown, 2018). As a form of video art, documentary is also facing unprecedented digital challenges. This challenge stems from the ontological crisis brought about by the digital age, that is, the essential characteristics of documentary film have been greatly impacted in the digital age. The authenticity required by documentaries has

encountered a "fractured" digital crisis in the digital age, that is, in the process of adapting to digitalization, the material source, picture arrangement and audience acceptance of documentaries, it can no longer establish a solid index relationship with objective reality.

## 2.1 Fracture of the Material's Source

Generally, the material of documentary is mainly divided into two categories: natural material and artificial material, of which natural material is mainly obtained from the objective world, mainly for real-time shooting, interview and physical evidence collection, and artificial material is created by the creators with their subjective initiative, including acting and adding materials. Under the traditional perspective of the ontology paradigm of authenticity, the core material is the natural material shot in real time, which is the fundamental difference between documentary and other film genres. Whenever possible, it is necessary to obtain real-time natural material as much as possible, and only when real-time material cannot be obtained, will they settle for the next best thing (Nie Xinru, 2021). Because this kind of material is the easiest to establish a consistent "index" relationship with objective reality, so as to ensure the basis of truth to the greatest extent. As Heidegger said, the true essence of something is determined by its true being, by the truth of each being (Heidegger, 2017). However, in the digital age, rapid advances in virtual reality and computer-generated imagery have allowed documentarians to create a vast amount of content based on artificial virtual images. This fictitious source of material can lead to a lack of authenticity, and viewers may have difficulty distinguishing between the virtual and the real. Like a documentary about historical events, it has traditionally relied on authentic material such as historical archives and on-site interviews. But in the digital age, computer-generated virtual scenes and characters can be used to reconstruct historical events. In the so-called "animated documentary" represented by *Waltz with Bashir* (2008), the traditional film image based on geometric sensitivity is replaced by an artificial virtual image rendered digitally, and the moving image no longer needs to be based on the physical "index" of objective reality, and the relationship between the symbol and the object is "obscured" to the greatest extent. This kind of processing undoubtedly greatly destroys the source of authenticity.

## 2.2 Fracture of the Picture's Arrangement

Whether it is natural material or artificial material, it can only become a documentary after the arrangement of the picture. This is closely related to how the producer uses the material, which material should be kept and which should be deleted, which actually involves the producer's personal understanding of reality, adaptation to the surrounding environment, and his own cultural literacy, ideology, etc. (Nie Xinru, 2010). In the ontological paradigm of authenticity, the selection, organization, and presentation of images should all serve the expression of authenticity. The picture arrangement needs to pay attention to the spatio-temporal structure of the recombination of materials, the truth of its restoration, and the truth of the use of sound, and realize the rationality of the logical structure of reality and drama with the help of editing. However, digital technology has the nature of nothingness, and it cannot touch the material world, so there will be no constraints and taboos of human society. This allows human beings to be no longer bound by objective laws at the physical level, nor by ethics and morality at the social level. Because in the digital world, everything including time and space can become



variables manipulated and controlled by digital engineers, the computational element has permeated everyday objects, mobile devices, and man-made environments (Sarah Price, Carey Juet, Barry Brown, 2018). For example, in a nature-themed documentary, it is traditionally supposed to show the ecological environment of the real natural world. However, in the digital age, creators can make some natural scenes that do not exist appear realistic through post-production special effects, which will make the human impulse to fake infinitely amplified in the documentary. For example, in the BBC's nature documentary series *Patagonia: Earth's Secret Paradise* (2015), there is a spectacular scene of a volcanic eruption accompanied by "lightning", which is synthesized by digital technology, violating the principle of objective authenticity in time and space, and undermining the credibility and credibility of the BBC.

### 2.3 Fracture of the Audience's Acceptance

Although there is a distinction between natural and artificial materials in today's documentaries, most documentaries use a combination of these two types of material. This is because documentary that only uses natural material often require the audience to have a certain knowledge of the context or background of the event, history and other circumstances, otherwise there may be a phenomenon that the things presented in the documentary cannot be fully understood or misunderstood. Artificial material can often play a role of explanation and guidance, which can help the audience overcome the shortcomings of insufficient knowledge. In the ontological paradigm of authenticity, the audience wants to see a work that can clearly separate different materials, and can have their own opinions on the judgment of the truth of things, rather than being taught by the traditional audience and letting the documentary work lead the way. To a certain extent, we can even say that the authenticity of any documentary work that cannot effectively separate various materials of different nature is questionable (Nie Xinru, 2021). Digital technology is based on the prescriptiveness of the binary digits "0" and "1", and digital media can eventually be converted into numeric symbols "0" and "1". Digital images can be infinitely realistic, but they also have a huge homogeneity. As a result, viewers' trust in the authenticity of documentaries may decline, as they increasingly struggle to distinguish between artificial and natural material. Documentaries in the digital age may captivate audiences with visual effects such as special effects and virtual sets, and virtual footage may be mixed with real natural footage, making it difficult for viewers to distinguish between real and fictional parts. Especially with the development of deep fake technology and image synthesis technology, realistic synthetic videos can be generated, including fictional scenes and events, making it difficult for viewers to distinguish between real and fake. For example, Nvidia released a documentary that restored the whole process of the production of "Digital Huang Renxun" at the top computer graphics conference in August 2021, and the audience only discovered that at NVIDIA's product launch conference three months ago, the time and space background, environmental items, and hosts were all synthesized by digital technology, and even the host was not the deity.

The digital age and its technology have brought new and infinite possibilities to documentaries, but they have also brought the paradigm of authenticity that it requires to face the dilemma of digital rupture. In this context, Bill Nichols is the first to question the ontological paradigm of

documentary as a representation of the world we all share, and that we evaluate a representation more on the basis of the pleasurable nature it provides, the value of the insight or knowledge, the meaning of the proposition or tendency, and the tone or perspective it instills (Bill Nichols, 2007). Vivian Sobčėk simply emphasizes that documentary is not a thing, but a subjective relationship with the subject of the film, and it is the consciousness of the audience that ultimately determines the type of object of the film (Wang Chi, 2013). Brian Winston directly believes that in the changing postmodern world, as long as the two foundations of narrative and witness remain unshakable, any expression in documentary is acceptable (Brian Winston, 2013). These doubts have had a huge impact at home and abroad, and since there are so many doubts, has the authenticity ontology of documentaries in the digital age been thoroughly structured?

### **3. The Transcendence of the Ontological Crisis: the Persistence of the Real Essence**

There is no doubt that the digital technology has greatly improved the expressiveness and enjoyment of documentary, but the digital "fracture" caused by digital procession and image reconstruction has also continuously impacted the real base of contemporary documentaries, and the question of whether the revolutionary changes of digital technology will change the essence of documentaries is particularly urgent at present. Especially in the hustle and bustle of the entertainment industry, digital technology has deeply integrated business logic, gradually constructing a unique ideology, transforming the original documentary with truth and depth into a tool for commercial interests. It subtly transports the viewer to an illusory time and space that is gradually distancing itself from reality, allowing them to linger in a dream world of light and shadow. In this way, we have to respond to this question, otherwise according to Winston, as long as it is harmless to ensure that "narratives" and "witnesses", deconstructing reality and history, there is no need for documentaries to exist. But we believe that in the digital age, documentaries can still stick to the bottom line of their essence- authenticity. The reasons are as follows:

#### **3.1 Digital technology is not omnipotent**

Digital technology uses binary digits "0" and "1" as the basis for computing, processing, storage, and dissemination, but in the digital world, digital technology is actually a non-physical existence that survives in the form of data streams. Its modeling ability basically comes from the imitation of traditional media, and through "parasitism" at the end of traditional media, the image information obtained by traditional media, such as images and paintings, is converted into digital, and digital technology cannot invent a set of figurative graphics that completely belong to it (Nie Xinru, 2015). The so-called digitalization is an "imitation" of the "surface effect of things", and does not involve the essence. In order for digital technology to convert all kinds of information that has been obtained into audio and video symbols, it must be parasitic on existing traditional media. Digital technology replaces the original optoelectronic particles of the image with a purely artificial digital signal, and reorganizes it into a visible image according to the form of traditional media (Nie Xinru, 2016). For example, Errol Morris's documentary film *A Brief History of Time* uses a large number of digital special effects to visualize theories such as black holes and the Big Bang, creating a kind of cosmic world in

collapse, and interprets Hawking's classic book "A Brief History of Time - From the Big Bang to Black Holes", but we do not call it a cartoon because of the extensive use of digital technology, at most it is a digital documentary.

### 3.2 The Subjective Need of Human Instinct

When a human being is such a creature, the acceptance of visual information by the individual human has already begun. From the art of painting to photographic technology to the leap of camera technology, each step of evolution reflects the deep longing of our hearts for the real world, a kind of pursuit of "the restoration of material reality" that Krakauer calls it. Our creativity and imagination are rooted in intimate contact with the objective world, and once this feeling disappears, it is like a loss of self-consciousness. In the instinctive consciousness of human beings, the pursuit of truth never stops. Although digital images, with their superb technology, are able to transform things of different natures into the same digital language, almost to the point of "confusing the real with the fake", however, it severs the physical continuity to a certain extent, allowing artificial code to intervene in it. This technology itself does not have the ability to communicate directly with the outside world, which seriously hinders the direct communication and interaction between human beings and the objective world (Nie Xinru, 2016). The instinctive pursuit of truth by human consciousness, like Neo's awakening in *The Matrix*, will drive us to break free from the illusory world constructed by digital technology. Despite the high expressive capabilities of digital technology, it is difficult to shake people's unwavering demand for image authenticity, let alone completely deconstruct the audience's deep-rooted belief in the paradigm of image ontology authenticity. Once this authenticity is violated, it will be questioned and criticized by the audience. For example, a scene in the fourth episode of the science and education documentary *Serengeti* (2019), in which a young zebra struggles in crocodile-infested waters, is attacked by a crocodile and eventually swept away by the current, which was revealed by the media to be composed of two or more shots. One of the most important reasons why the media wants to expose the BBC's fraud is that the synthesis of digital technology cuts off the audience's contact with the external objective world, which violates the audience's pursuit of image authenticity.

### 3.3 A new approach to the real path

As a non-physical medium, the visual images presented by digital technology are inherently "imaginary". Looking at the development of documentaries, we will find that since the advent of documentaries, there have been precedents for recreating history or facts with the help of virtual means. In the early days, documentary filmmakers faced great challenges in capturing realistic, pristine images due to technical constraints, such as the inconvenience of carrying cumbersome cameras and the limited image quality caused by low-sensitivity film. As a result, they had to compensate for these technical deficiencies by using fictional techniques such as "re-enactment" and re-enactment, which became very popular at the time. In the sixties and seventies, with the birth of audiovisual synchronization technology, documentary creation gained unprecedented freedom, however, when it comes to history, culture and technology, it is still difficult for creators to directly obtain original sound and picture materials. In today's ever-changing wave of technology, digital technology, as a frequently used virtual reality



technique in documentary creation, has become a new way to pursue authenticity. For example, in documentaries such as *The Forbidden City* and *The Old Summer Palace*, digital technology recreates the historical spaces that once existed in real times through immersive audio-visual experiences. With its fictional characteristics, digital technology has built a tacit relationship with the real society in our hearts, and has become an effective tool for us to pursue the authenticity of images. It should be noted that although the virtual technique represented by digital technology can be used as a strategy for documentary to express reality, they should not be abused, and not all subjects are applicable. For example, Brielle Ranger's 2005 film, *The Death of a President*, was presented in the form of a documentary, but it made extensive use of digital technology to fictionalize a political event. The film is based on the real image of former President Bush in Chicago and fictionalizes the tragic situation of Bush being shot. The move caused a huge controversy in the United States, and many viewers and commentators were disgusted by it, especially Bush supporters and members of the Republican Party, and director Ranch even received death threats for it. This case is a reminder that in documentary filmmaking, the use of digital technology must be used with caution to ensure that it serves the pursuit of authenticity and does not deviate from its essence.

Beyond the inaccessible boundaries of the old means, digital technology has injected new vitality into the pursuit of the reality of documentaries with its unique advantages. However, we must recognize that digital technology, while powerful, also has insurmountable limitations. Its non-entity and dependent characteristics determine that it can only simulate the appearance of things more, but it is difficult to touch the deep essence. Even if digital technology has the excellent ability to transform diversified things into a unified digital format, which temporarily covers its internal limitations, the deep desire and pursuit of authenticity in human beings will not make digital technology wanton. From a more macro social and historical perspective, the "virtual" attribute of digital technology, with the help of modern technology, undoubtedly provides a new way for documentaries to reach the reality. However, this does not mean that digital technology can change the nature of documentaries. The core of the documentary is its authenticity and a deep interpretation of the reality, and digital technology is only an auxiliary tool to achieve this goal. Therefore, whether now or in the future, digital technology cannot change the essential nature of documentaries to pursue truth and record history.

## CONCLUSION

In the current surging wave of digitalization, documentaries have unprecedented convenience and possibilities on the road of exploring and presenting the truth. However, no matter how much digital technology has had a great impact on the essence of documentary, whether it adheres to the ontological paradigm of documentary authenticity, or believes that the authentic nature of documentary has been completely deconstructed, in fact, it still does not break away from the two ontological dimensions that represent the essence of documentary film, documentary and fiction. Because for documentaries, whether they are documentary or fictional, they are different means for documentaries to show the truth, and there is no fundamental difference between the two. The key lies in the attitude of documentary filmmakers towards authenticity. After all, in real life, there are very few things that happen to

be at the two poles of record and fiction, and most of them are in between. The authenticity we are talking about should be the dialectical unity between documentary and fiction, and individual judgment and sense of conscience are indispensable internal driving forces in documentary filmmaking in the digital age.

After nearly 100 years of practical exploration and theoretical discussion, it has been found that recording and fiction are showing a trend of integration in the ever-changing social environment, especially the "virtual" attribute of digital technology can become a means to reach the truth. It is precisely because of this that the two dimensions of the essence of documentary created by Flahadi and Grierson have been questioned and challenged by many people. Although we can respond to these doubts by reiterating the connotation of authenticity, it is undeniable that the changes in the social environment and the revolutionary progress of digital technology have had a profound impact on the understanding of the essential attributes of documentaries, the concept of documentary education, and the boundaries of documentary genres. In the face of these challenges, we need more in-depth theoretical preparation and accumulation to better cope with future changes. Digital technology has dissolved the physical existence of traditional media, and to some extent, blurred the boundaries between documentaries and feature films, but our pursuit and desire for authenticity has never changed. No matter how realistic the fiction is, it will eventually be penetrated by the light of reality, and the truth will eventually be revealed to the world.

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